

REMARKS

Applicants have amended their claims in order to facilitate proceedings in connection with the above-identified application, so as to achieve earliest possible issuance of a U.S. patent based thereon. Specifically, Applicants have amended claim 9 to incorporate therein the subject matter of claim 17. In light thereof, Applicants have cancelled claims 17 and 26 without prejudice or disclaimer, and have amended dependency of claim 27.

The Examiner is thanked for the indicated allowability of the subject matter of claims 17 and 26, as set forth in Item 4 on page 4 of the Office Action mailed December 15, 2003. By the present amendments, wherein the subject matter of claim 17 has been incorporated into claim 9, claim 17 is now set forth in independent form, as claim 9. In view thereof, it is respectfully submitted that claim 9 and claims dependent thereon, which are all claims remaining in the application, should now be allowed.

The rejection of claims 9-14, 16, 18-20, 23-25, 27 and 28 on prior art grounds, as set forth in Items 2 and 3 on pages 2-4 of the enclosed Office Action, is noted. Such rejection is moot, in view of incorporation of the subject matter of claim 17 into claim 9.

In view of the foregoing comments and amendments, reconsideration and allowance of all claims presently in the application are respectfully requested.

If the Examiner believes that there are any other points which may be clarified or otherwise disposed of either by telephone discussion or by personal interview, the Examiner is invited to contact Applicants' undersigned attorney at the number indicated below.

To the extent necessary, Applicants petition for an extension of time under 37 CFR 1.136. Please charge any shortage in fees due in connection with the filing of this

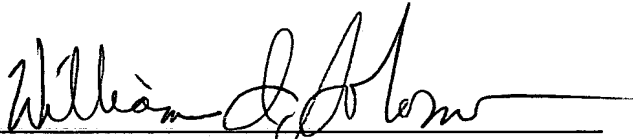
Application No.: 09/729,777

Docket No.: 393.39350X00

paper, including extension of time fees, to the Antonelli, Terry, Stout & Kraus, LLP Deposit Account No. 01-2135 (Docket No. 393.39350X00), and please credit any excess fees to such Deposit Account.

Respectfully submitted,

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